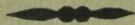


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Ministry of Education
Literary Committee



BUDDHISM IN LAOS



by
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and
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FOREWORD

This book is an attempt to picture the everyday life and culture of the Lao people, a subject sometimes little known by people abroad.

It is translated from works written in Laotian by Thao Nhouy ABHAY, a distinguished member of the "Literary Committee", our aim being to publicize in other languages our tradition and national literature, with a view to furthering international exchanges in books and cultures.

We also trust that booklet will be of use to many readers anxious to discover our ancient philosophy which embodies so much feeling for peace and happiness, the characteristics of Lao cosmogony.

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Within the Buddhist world, Laos has been, for a long period of time, a Site where Monks flourished together with the pagodas and other temples which have leant it the charm of picturesque revealed through its tradition, folklore, countless festivals and yearly ceremonies where people venerate the "Enlightened One". The Lord Buddha and His representations can be found all over the country, from the little family Shrine to dark caves where He is to be discovered, peaceful, meditating, radiant and with His everlasting mystical smile.

Thao KÉNE

BUDDHISM IN LAOS

In the heart of Ganges India, between Benares and Patna, about six centuries before Christ, there spread out a country called Magadha. There Brahmanism was the national cult; but restless spirits of both young and old men, by hundreds and by thousands, left their families or abandoned their hearthstones in search of a state of immortality which was not given them in their traditional organizations.

Then was born a Wise Man, Who founded a new Doctrine- Buddhism- and for forty years he taught the transferred people.

In the middle of the third century before Christ, Açoka, most pious among the Buddhist Kings of Magadha, brought this new Doctrine Within the borders of his Empire and extended it to Pendjab in the west and to Ceylon in the south.

In the second century of the Christian era "under the reign and auspices of the bearded barbarian Kanishka, whose authority extended from India proper and from Pendjab in Bactriana into the valleys of the Oxus, from Yaxarta and Tarim, Buddhism opened wide its doors to the highlands of Asia. From Turkestan it won China, Tibet, and later the steppes of the North and Japan." (L. de la Vallée Poussin)

However, while the Sanscritized monks were conquering Greater Asia, a Buddhism of a Pâli language, known as the "Small Vehicle," passed through from Ceylon and continental India, into Burma, to Cambodia, into the Malayan Peninsula, and into the Thai countries in the basins of the Menam and the Mekong.

Even in India Buddhism flourished until the end of the sixth century after Christ; but from that date, for causes "more internal than external" (L. Finot), the Doctrine gave ground to other theories and from the time of the eighth century "faded into gradual disappearance."

Its refuge in the country which saw it born was and still remains only Ceylon.

Destroyed in India, it is on the banks of the Mekong and the Menam that Buddhism was to find its more certain sanctuary, among the Areca palm trees and the coconut trees, within the bosom of the Thai people who descended from the mountains of the North. It was finally in these plains and valleys that the site was found most congenial to its nature and its needs. There exist between Ceylon and the Lao people a striking physical similarity and profound moral affinities.

At times when I have passed through the Island, the sky of Ceylon, swept by calm breezes, always recalls that of my own country. Our traditions agree in confirming that the Phra Bang - the actual Royal Palladium - and the Phra Kè - the Emerald Buddha - were melted and fashioned in Ceylon. From there have also come the Tripitaka and other religious texts. Our poets and our religious fervor evoke our envy of this happy Island which, in spite of all its vicissitudes, should continue to conserve the treasures of our faith.

Laos, even as Ceylon, is truly the land of monks.

On bright mornings, as the sun's first rays gild the tree-tops, and sometimes in rain or mist, they go, wrapped in their orange togas, with downcast eyes, walking through the town streets and village lanes, questing their rice and food. They pass, one by one, before standing men with scarf across the shoulder, and kneeling women carrying cups filled with offerings. Before each one they tender their bowl for alms, tilt it a little, and when they have received the ball of rice or piece of cake from the most reverent men and women, they raise themselves a little, slide the bowl back and close it and conceal it under the toga; and always silent and with downcast eyes, they continue their circuit of religious mendicancy.

For in Laos, as in every country of Theravadin Buddhism (Cambodia, Thailand, Burma, Ceylon), monks beg their food, thus permitting the faithful, by charity, to acquire merit. The followers of Buddhism have always been divided into two classes: the clerics, images of Buddha, forming the Community, who practice and teach the Doctrine; and the laity, still attached to this world's interests; the first subsist on charities and on the upkeep of the second.

On Buddhism and the monks many scholarly studies have been published. All those who live in this country know the distinction between the Small and Great Vehicle.

My knowledge of this matter is limited. But having been reared in the Buddhist faith, I would like to bring in this modest exposition a testimony powerful in the life of the Lao people. I would like to add to the moonlight a small candle of living attainments.

I would like to discourse not about learned treatises and doctrinal theories but about what we as Laotians know of Buddha and the Doctrine, what we think of it, such as the monks, and what I know of their influence on our thinking and our lives.

THE HISTORY OF BUDDHISM IN LAOS

The history of P. Le Boulanger, supporting its position on the Charter of the foundation of Wat Gnod Keo, at Luang Prabang, affirms that Buddhism was introduced to Laos at the middle of the fourteenth century, a little after Chao Fa-Ngoun had achieved Laotian unity.

Nothing appears to me more hazardous than such an affirmation for Buddhism had flowered out several centuries earlier, especially in Cambodia, Thailand, and in Burma. Surrounded by these countries, Laos was not able to remain closed to the Good Doctrine.

Otherwise M. Paul Lévy, formerly Director of the French School of the Far East, found at Luang Prabang several years ago some Buddhas of a different workmanship, undoubtedly antedating those which characterize the School of the Cambodian Religious Mission of 1356. It is understandable that Buddhism was known and practiced long before history could bring to light our country of the past.

However that may be, it is officially admitted that Buddhism, triumphant over spirits and superstitions beliefs, attained its greatest following in the valley of the Mekong, in the seventeenth century of the Christian era. During this period, under the direction of the best of the kings of Lan Sang, Chao Set' thathirath, some seventy pagodas, not to mention Wat Pra Kèo and That Luang, were erected in Vientiane to the glory of Buddha and his teachings. One of his immediate successors, Soulingna Vongsa, kept in hand the organization of these places of worship which became, according to the testimony of Van Wuthhoff, schools of Buddhist culture and at the same time of the arts. The monks were respected and cherished, their morals were pure, and rigorous was their observance of the rules of the Community.

Morning and evening, in the smaller villages, gongs marked the hours of the day, and every seven days people crowded into the pagodas. Every one aspired to be worthy in giving and the monks received alms from pure hands and upright hearts. They knew the Texts and Rites, the life of Buddha and the Dagna. A precious emulation motivated them; learned and holy men formed schools and their names were on every tongue. They were consulted in the minutest events of domestic life: at birth, during illness, at death, on dreams, and the omens of the sky. They answered by anecdotes or by citing the words of the Master and their counsel was scrupulously followed and respected. In short, they consoled and encouraged, exercising on all, kings and princes, townsmen and peasants, a beneficent influence.

But alas! the death of Soulingna Vongsa, in 1694,

allowing nefarious ambitions and growing dissensions, opened the country to anarchy and invasion. Buddhism underwent a deadly struggle.

The royal city of Vientiane, conquered and laid waste the first time in 1778 by the Siamese General Chao Mahakras-sad "Souk" (Chulalok), lost this time its Emerald Buddha and subsequently the Phra Bang, from which it had been transported in 1707. A little later, Chao Anou, having sought to avoid the domination of the Siamese yoke, was conquered in 1828 and the Kingdom was again sacked in fire and blood. Finally, in 1873 the Yunnanais destroyed the pagodas and leveled the That which had escaped the cupidity of the vandals of 1828. Every pagoda perished: the Wat Phra Kèo and Wat Phiavet, marvels of the Capital, and until the time of That Luang, the national shrine.

The monks, gripped by a sense of inexorable fatalism which had settled over all, recited their prayers without understanding and the faithful went to the pagodas mute with unconscious atavism.

Finally, as if to complete the disaster, the most ferocious adversary of Buddha, the Ghost, was reborn, reconquering the lost ground, for in truth "his cult had never died. The ghost was everywhere, good or bad, mingling with divinities and Buddha, lodging even in the statues themselves." (R. Lingat)

A very confusing mythology then seized people's minds, a mythology composed of superstition and religious faith, which mingled in the confusion every creature of Hell and Paradise, of sky and Intersky. Above the ruined Lao country soared ignorance, anxiety and fear.

THE LIFE OF BUDDHA

But the flame of faith was not extinguished. As children of the French peace, it had been permitted to all of us to account for how many of our fathers were remaining fervent in their faith and how profoundly Buddhism had been

anchored within their minds.

Even from childhood, in the stillness of the night-as was the custom with our ancestors in the happy epochs of "Lan Sang"-we have been able to know and understand the life of Buddha and his principal incarnations, the Doctrine and the rules of the Community.

Our childhood memories indeed do not remind us of any books like the Christian catechisms more or less ornamental, adorned or illustrated. No, it is not by reading and study that we are initiated into the life of wisdom; rather has it been by oral traditions when on a calm afternoon we have followed our mothers into the pagodas, or when, a little later, escaping from their jealous oversight, we wandered off to marvel at the contorsions of our primitive bards. For the lives of Buddha are read and commented on in the pagodas; put into poetry, they are sung by our trabadours, sung by jugglers, whom on festival evenings are seen on high platforms gesticulating to the music of the khène.

Ah! how can one forget those serene nights of our happy and carefree childhood, during which, in the moonlight or night dew, we have learned not only the charm of our poetry, spirit and its cadence, but also the lives of the great Sage whose Doctrine illumines our entire life.

One of the songs begins like this: "In a city of India called Kapila (Kapilavastu) lived a magnificent and wealthy prince named Sisoutho (Sudhodana). His wife, more beautiful than any expression, was called Maya."

We all know of his fabulous birth and magnificent life. We know the dream of Maya and the prophecy that foretold the birth of Him who was to become the mightiest Emperor of the Earth, or the Buddha.

We know of this miraculous birth in the depths

of a forest. Divinities from a four cardinal directions received him in a gold net and two streams of holy water were poured upon them for the purification of Himself and his Mother. We know that she died several days after

her delivery and there was given to the newly born prince the name "Sithad" (Siddhartha).

We know that he was married at sixteen years of age; that he had a son, and that the same evening of the latter's birth, disgusted at the disorderly conduct of the palace women, he forsook his treasures, his wife and child, in order to wear the cloth of a monk and take the name of Gautama: he was then twenty-nine years of age.

I shall recount the circumstances, as you know, that preceded this departure: the four ones that he met, an old man, a sick man, a dead man, and a monk, who gave him at first feelings of decrepitude and human sorrow, then lastly the serenity of those who abandon all and no longer desire anything.

Oh! the images which enchanted our youth! the scenes of pleasure which surrounded the young prince, his marriage with her who waited on and desired only him, his triumph until the last moment over his cousins and his rivals, notably over Thévathad (Devadatta), who never forgave him and became his implacable enemy, and who three times in the course of his life, made attempts on his life.

We have admired the ascetic Gautama fasting year after year, bruising himself bodily and depriving himself of necessities until he became a skeleton; we have divined the wisdom and we have understood the righteousness of the just measure and the golden mean until India gave proof of Bodhisattva that a violin gives accurate sounds only when its strings are neither too tight nor too loose; we have felt ourselves delivered from our anxiety, and happiness finally was accorded where the temptations and threats of Mara baffled him. The Bodhisattva took the Goddess of the Earth as witness of his uprightness and she answered the request by a voice which led

led the army of Evil astray. The bodhisattva became buddha at forty.

With what fervor then, upon the advice of our mothers, have we adored, have we venerated the Goddess of the Earth; with what deep sentiment of pious gratitude did we hold her then--and later-- when we poured down the warm water we invited the precious Goddess to escort us.

Incoherent images, perhaps, but so attractive and dear to our hearts! without asking us who was Buddha, nor what was the setting in India, we adore the man of whom it was said that in a few places everywhere one has found his footprints; this man, the greatest and wisest of the Earth--he whose statues fill our pagodas and whose lessons fill our souls.

LAOS BEFORE THE DOCTRINE

We have heard our fathers repeat all day long that life is sorrow, that nothing belongs to us, that this existence is one among a thousand others, that what we reap now is only the fruit of actions of our past existences, that death can overtake us at any moment and that our salvation depends only on ourselves. And our fathers recommended for us humility, meekness, justice and charity.

O Lao charity, what mistakes are committed in thy name!

To accomplish charity, for the Laotian, is expressed in the term "hed boun", that is, to achieve well, to give alms; in other words, to obtain merits for the future life, and, if possible, the final nirvana.

And to whom does one give alms if not to the monks, these direct representatives of Buddha, his living images on earth? For Buddha himself gave advice and counsel as to what to do:

"The cult of the late Buddha is as useful, meritorious, and obligatory as the cult of the living Buddha. Buddha, though at the final stage of nirvana, is a living source of merit". (Louis de La Vallée Poussin).

That is why the best of all good actions is the work of the cult and of adoration.

"There is no comparison able to give us an idea of the immortal worth of the least offering. Whoever with a pious step will stroll around the shrines or monuments which contain relics, who will light the tapers and carry flowers, will put into the earth powerful roots of merit, and will avoid Hell and obtain Heaven". (Ibid.)

That is why, even from early childhood, we learned to walk around and inspect pagodas, flowers and candles in hand; that is why, from the time we learned how to speak, we made with our sisters and companions vows of offering of our hair and bones to our body and heart; that is why, imitating the example of our elder brothers and mothers, we have never dared to profane the floors of our pagodas or dig the slightest hole in them.

We awaited impatiently for feast day offering us the full and cloudless moon, also offered us opportunity to work for a better life and to manifest our gratitude to our relatives. The sixth month, at the Triple Relevation of Buddha, we are made wise; the ninth and tenth months make us charitable, at which time we distribute cakes, fruits, cigarettes and quids of betel nut in the pagodas or at the crossroads.

By means of listening to endless repetitions, we know by heart the commandments in Pali, and were impatient only to have them repeated, once we became bonzes, by our mothers, for it was they who constituted, one affirms, a great source of merit.

And when finally, having passed the age of twenty, we were asked by our parents to wear the cloth, with perhaps less fear than a Frenchman who dreams of wearing a military jacket, we accepted the shaving of the head and

everybrows, convinced that-be it only for a few weeks--we would bring together the Tathagatha (the predestinated) and would work out our own salvation and that of our families. For, as I have previously stated, if Buddhism has two types of follows, the clerics and the laity, it affords two means of salvation: the way to nirvana for those who abstain and meditate, and those of rebirth and from Paradise to the people who are attached to sensual pleasures, but who give alms and reverence the relics.

The bouns were an outgrowth of this latter creed.

"To make a boun" is to give to Buddha a disciple by arranging for the ordination and baptism of a bonze priest; "to make a boun" is to take part in the offerings at the festivals of Borvorana--at the end of Buddhist Lent--it is to present gifts of food and clothing; it is, on the principal dates of the life of Buddha, to meditate on one's life, participate in processions--which are pilgrimages--around reliquaries, it is to offer with a spirit of piety, candles and flowers at the That and the statues of the Saints.

But even though the Catholic religious festivals are accompanied by profane rejoicings--at Christmas or mid--Lent, for example--at our ceremonies, celebrated in pagodas, are preceded or followed by manifestations which are sacrifices to life: love songs and courtings, music and sometimes feasts.

He who sees only one aspect of these feast makes a great mistake; the sincere piety of the Lao people dominates these festive occasions even in the most apparently profane occasions as the most highly religious.

The Laotian has given himself up body and soul to the good law. There is only to regard it, if one wants to be convinced, how the Lao people have been impervious to all other religious doctrine.

The Laotian is tolerant, even to the extent of unconcern. You may perhaps have heard it said that

paster, to mention only them, making their rounds for propaganda waited in the pagodas; that the monks assisted them to call together the villagers. But they, after having profited by the records and the distribution of pamphlets, would go away peacefully to prepare meals for their priests, saying as did the Normans without knowing it: "They are perhaps right, but are we wrong?" The Laotian has given himself up, body and soul, to the law of righteousness and that, for him, is represented by the monk.

The monk, as an image of Buddha is respected and venerated: all prostrate themselves before him and none dares to suspect his good faith. No one dare to accuse him or even criticize him for no one of us, speaking frankly, that certain of what he precisely knows. The monk reigns and the inhabitant care.

In a happy epochs of "Lan Sang" as I have indicated, one consults the priest on the minutest acts and thoughts of life; today, with calm and prosperity returned, the tranquil villager rules his life according to the Buddhist carender.

THE LAOTIAN AND THE BUDDHIST YARE

Permit me to show you, this point, what is the life of a good Laotian in the period of a yare. Let us begin by taking him the day the earth ends its rotation and our man buckles up for last time his trunk and makes a clean sweep of his house.

It is the new yare. He inaugurates it by having every pious work scrupulously cleaned, washed, and perfumed, especially the ~~x~~ innumerable statues in the houses and pagodas; then, joining other in the village, he goes to the nearest river, brings in sand and builds up the wats a propitiatory action among all since each grain of sand washes away a sin and grant a wish.

During the following month at the sound of gongs and with prayers, one makes a tour of the pagodas and prostrates himself before the Buddhas still shining from

the recent bath. Young and old alike, on this occasion, make promises and extend good wishes for the year just beginning and for the lives to come.

Soon afterward, there is the full moon of the sixth month, a very important date, since it witnessed the birth, the enlightenment and the death of Buddha. He who sees on this occasion only the noisy parades and carnival dances cannot realize the fervor which, at the same time, elevates the soul. It is necessary to see, on the same day the pious processions leading the nagas (candidates) to ordination and the priests to baptism. It is necessary to behold, on the interior of the pagodas, crouched men and women repeating the holy commandments and devoutly prostrating themselves after each peroration of the monk who is preaching.

Outside, indeed, the crowd shouts and rockets shot off in the popular explosions of joy; but it must be understood that the rockets light the funeral pyre of the most holy Saint, that they are a sign of joy, for, at the same time, death is deliverance and Buddha is parinirvanated when he is consumed in the fire.

A few days later, rain begins to fall reminding men of the beginning of the next agricultural cycle. As a parenthesis I cannot help but ask now of those who think that the Laotian is lazy to welcome the testimony of a native of this country.

In Laos, industry is still non-existent; everyone must supply his own needs, and in country, division of labor and specialization are unknown. The Laotian forges and mends his plowshare; he straightens the handle himself and make shafts and yokes; it is he who repairs the cart which has kept some months under the house; he makes harrows and knives; he goes into the forest in search of the strongest fibers best known only to him with which he will prepare ropes for his oxen and buffaloes; he catches fish, call back of life by the celestial rains; he fabricates fishing tackle

from bamboo, hemp or grass-cloth ...And it is still he who repairs, who fetches straw for a new roof, who repairs the roof, which has fallen to pieces, who fetches straw for a new roof, who repairs the weaving loom and cares for the sick buffalo...

However, he must seek everyday meals, he must feed children and monks. Consider that there is no market place in the Laotian village; servants and workers are unknown; everyone must rely on himself and feed himself. A Laotian would consider it a great sin not to serve food to the monks, or to serve them only the padèk of the ordinary, miserable meal...

For the monk, he will raise chickens and ducks; the best fruits and tenderest vegetables are for the representative of Buddha for he moreover--according to the common conviction-- is the source of all worthiness and the intermediary between death and us.

Finally is it necessary, paraphrasing on La Fontaine, in giving the complete picture of the Laotian, to speak besides of his wife, his children and his monks; his taxes, the statute labor and roadworks, the helping hand he must give to neighbors under all circumstances, in the building of a house, in the important actions concerning agricultural projects?

These are the works which could scarcely come from those who accuse our man of laziness. The Laotian always manages to do them with a smile, getting up with the chickens and returning home at night. Has he not the right, in compensation, to dream now and then by moonlight or idle away sometime in the sunshine, when his provisions are supplied, his house repaired and his granary full?

Then there in the return of the feasts of the dead, preceded by the grandiose ceremony which stirs up the whole village. The monks in the peregrination have renovated and cleaned the pagodas; also cleaned are the houses and streets of the village.

In the beginning of the season during which, stopped by the rains, Buddha retired to the garden of jetavana,

everyone is intent on examining himself, and even as the monks go weekly to general confession, even so each inhabitant holds a vigil with his conscience and works out his salvation. On the road to the pagoda, the weary heart is comforted by thinking of the Universal sorrow and possible Paradise.

I pass the solemn day in silence--the full moon of the eighth month--the procession with the candles and the clothes offered for sale to which everybody has contributed; I shall insist on the three months of this lent during which regularly, every week, everybody comes to the pagoda with his offering--listens to the sermons and practices the eight commandments.

It is at the heart of lent that the two feasts of our dead take place: the Hokhaopap Din (end of the ninth month) and the Hokhao Slak, at the full moon of the tenth month.

As far as I can remember, it is to my mind the period the most dignified, the time when my fellow countrymen are on their best behavior. I can see now the weekly processions of men and women of all ages going to the pagodas; I can hear the monotonous recital of moral lessons or lives of the Bodhisattva; I can hear every day the tam-tam of the pagoda ringing each four hours and its resonance recalls some forgotten legend of an imprisoned princess and evokes their reappearance into the world of the living men long since departed. The tam-tam of the pagodas, that tam-tam is the most and grave, its vibrations speaking to our hearts and imaginations the way church bells speak to Christians; that tam-tam is our story of our private life, it is our moral sustenance and the halting-place in our daily life.

The Feast of the Dead, what profuse offerings: cigarettes and guilds of betel nut, cakes and fruits; for a long time one has sought the first fruits, for a long time one has finished making the the others. In vain the greedy children cry for so many beautiful and

dilicious things; our mothers reply that we must not help ourselves before the monks and that all these good things are destined for the late sister or brother, for the great uncles and the grandfathers who have passed away.

In order to understand the joy of the children and general happiness of these two memorable days, it is necessary to refer to the Christian calendar, at Easter and at Christmas. Many a child has tasted, on these holy days, rare delicacies! And later on, alas! he has found some germ which transported him to another world...

Everywhere dainties, cakes and goodies of all sorts are hung up in the dusty air; some of them are at the entrances of houses, some in pagodas, some at the gates, and some even on tombstones... During these two days the Laotian suspends all field work and, putting into practice the commandments of the perfect, meditates in a profound sense on the meaning of life and frees himself for quiet occupations.

Then it is the end of Lent; it is the feast of the relics (treasures of the Saints) which marks the joyous time of harvest. It is the final feast of the third month, during which man, free of all urgent works, indulges in pleasure without reservation.

Then comes the fourth month, which opens the period of great charity, the feasts of Phravet, the Bodhisattva who gave up his wife his children and his horse. Following his example, everyone gives away money and these feasts of the villages have and equivalent in the Kan Thin during which one offers to the monks personal effects of clothing.

Buddha has said: "The riches of earth are to be sought after only for the maintenance of man and for the giving of alms... At death no one can carry with him this world's goods, so it is unreasonable to seek too much."

Of a practical faith, the Laotian is contented with little and gives many alms; emulously he quotes of immanent justice proving that ill-gotten gain never pays.

BUDDHISM IN THE LAOTIAN HOME

Every day, as I have said, the Laotian rises at daybreak, at the crowing of the cock. His rice is cooked at the call of the gongs announcing the approaching collection of the monks. When they arrive at the village, everybody is ready to fill their bowls with hot rice.

However, those who have just given their first alms make their drink-offering to attest to the Goddess of the Earth and express thier fond wishes, while the servants of the elders or the maid of house bring to the pagoda the morning meal for the monks. They walk in file over those one-way paths of Laotian villages, calling to each other, their poles on their shoulders, on which are hung behind their food baskets before their rice baskets. They also perform a meritorious act and will receive later on the daily blessing.

GNA'THA: "Rivers are full and supply and replenish the oceans. Thus the alms that you give at this moment will flow on those who are in the great beyond."

"May the rewards that you desire be granted unto you speedily. May all your wishes be granted unto you as full as the moon on the fifteenth day. And may they shine like the precious stone which gleams always in the most brilliant resplendence."

SAPIHI: "May all evils disappear. May all maladies and fevers disappear. May all dangers disappear."

"May you have long life. May the four jewels of Education be yours: Long Life, Happiness, Strength--you who have always behaved with humility and gentleness toward old people."

PHAVATOU SAB: "By all the power of Buddha, by his Teachings, and the spirit of the Community, may every happiness befall you. May the Divinities always protect you and may you always be in good health."

Then they, too, make a libation (drink-offering) attesting to Nang Thorani, the Goddess of the Earth. They transfer thier alms to those who are no longer, to the dead ones of thier family and to the wandering dead; they wish that they may soon be reborn, asking for themselves a better human life, for want of the supreme quality of arabat, the state of the blessed who will be reborn with the Buddha of the future...

Then, and only then, after having prostrated himself, does the Laotian take breakfast and get ready for work.

In the evening again before going to bed, alone or his family, he goes to place flowers on the statues of Buddha on the altar placed above his couch and recites the prayer by which he places his confidence and salvation in Buddha, his Doctrine and his Community. Once eight days he observes in so far as he can the five or eight commandments: do not kill, do not steal, do not commit adultery, do not drink alcohol, do not eat in the afternoon, do not adorn or perfume oneself, do not sleep on mattresses or on beds too high.

So elapses the life of the pious faithful, but his religious fervor siezes still on every important occasion of life to manifest itself: at birth, at adolescence, at marriage and at death.

Even though the monk does not go to houses when babies are born, though there is ceremony similar to Christian baptism with us, it is most often the monk who is consulted for the name to be given the infant. For the monk almost alone knew how to combine and make the conjunctions of the stars, the day and the hours of birth with the letters and syllables. Like the fairies in French legends, only he knew how to tell fortunes and instill optimism into the hearts of mothers; only he knew the remedies and measures to take to insure happiness and longevity for the newly born. With the little jewels offered by the parents and with a pendant fastened about the child's neck, or on his wrist, there was always a plaque of gold or silver unrolled which drew a few sacred

characters or even the entire "gatha".

The child belongs to the monk. From the time he is able to make himself useful, he is his mother's companion, he with the picture of Buddha; he is the lad who offers water, a cigarette or chew of betel nut, and when he reaches the age of about ten, he leaves his parents to live in the pagoda in order to serve the monk who has become his teacher. On this occasion the father always says to the master: "Make of him whatever you wish. Treat him (understand: maltreat him) as you please provided you do not make of him a cripple."

And, at the same time he is learning the alphabet, the child serves his apprenticeship for his life as a servant and unconsciously or not, learns by heart the elementary prayers. When the child is left in the care of the monks, the parents remain tranquil, unworried not only for the immediate future but also for the lives to come.

In this country the honest man is he who "hears the counsels of the monks." The monk is in effect the guru (khrou) whose word is law, whose advice, even though he be a novice, is preferred to tradition.

So each Laotian grows up under the control of a monk, his adviser (khrou) who will remain for him, even when he will have left the pagoda, a guide and friend, the comforter and sometimes even the confidant.

Think of the monk--and every male Lao has been a monk, a simple statement and not an exaggeration--who has served three masters: the monk (oupaja) who presided over the ceremony of his ordination and the two witnesses (kammavacha) who responded for him on the same occasion.

The monk presides at the marriage; he presides at death.

On the even of the wedding ceremony itself the betrothed are bound together by a cotton string at the

chapter-house of the monk, blessing the water with which the betrothed will be sprinkled the next morning at the first hour. Soon thereafter they go together to offer a meal to the monks and receive their benediction. It is a ceremony called souat mon lod nam yen by which, before their priests, our two youths will be united.

The burial ceremony in Laos has been described many times and the part and role of the monks exercised on this occasion, more than once placed in the light. Therefore I shall not insist on it.

I shall only recall that the dressing of the dead and all the rites before the placing into the coffin depend on the greatest faith in the Doctrine.

A silver coin or a piece of gold is placed in his mouth to inform him that earthly riches have been lost and that all he can take with him in death to the grave is what one has just placed carefully between his teeth. Earthly riches, then, are to be sought only for man's individual sustenance and for the giving of alms. His feet are tied together as well as his wrists, the elbows to show to men the links by which he is attached to the world, the love of their own people and the material interests are delusive things and fragile bonds that death breaks and destroys at his will.

The coffin is put on banana-tree trunks, for like these trees--wood which has no "heart"--the man has no substance. In him one searches in vain for what is of permanent duration or what constitutes in him the everlasting essence. The house is a happy house is a "huan di"--happy house! and the monks recite words of Buddha on death which prove the vanity of life.

"Life is an ephemeral thing. To be born and to die follow each other unceasingly, following a normal rhythm. After being born, we must pass away. Happiness consists in entering into the nothingness of passing away.

"Every animal died, is dead or must die. We, too

shall die: of death there is no doubt."

"The body left by the soul is nothing. Soon it will be useless on earth, like the trunk of a dead tree."

Parents console themselves: young men and young women make love and laugh in order not to dwell on death in this world of sorrow.

To divert still more surely death, in order that man may go to Heaven or be reborn more quickly, one sends some "Chek" or offerings to the monks, his favorite dishes as well as his personal effects (bang Sakoun).

Blessed be the Laotian who possesses a male child, thanks to whom he will be able to arrange for a ceremony of ordination and offer a disciple to Buddha.

One of the greatest satisfactions I afforded my mother, on the even of her life was when, my studies completed, I announced to her my desire to stay awhile at the pagoda--only for a few weeks. My mother recognized her son: she was repaid for all her sacrifices and miseries; she was recompensed for all the days of fasting and for hours of silent and thoughtful listening from which we profited when on "sin" days, returning from the pagoda, she assembled us to tell, in spite of her weariness, the lives of Bodhisattva, sharing with us her enthusiasms and faith.

On entering the pagoda, man saves himself and his people. That is why, at every age; as a Christian turns around in the church the Laotian turns around in his pagoda.

Toward the close of his life, each one takes refuge in the silence of the sanctuary. In an intimate relationship with the smiling, undeceived Buddha, each one consoles himself of an unstained past. through meditation, each one prepares himself for the final annihilation.

The Laotian is humble. The word he uses in designating himself when he speaks to an equal is "khoy" (slave) and "kha noy" (little slave) when addressing a superior. In the administrative language or when addressing a crowd, he employs the pronoun "Kha pha chao" which signifies, slave of Buddha.

Consequently: when he affirms that he is a slave of no one, the Laotian will fearlessly avow publicly that he is a servant of Buddha. To Buddha, to the Doctrine and the Community--Triple Jewels-- he renders thanks and expresses gratitude when, in his letters, he announces that he is well or is about to possess a little happiness. To the Triple Jewels the poet appeals for his inspiration or for assistance in his faltering science.

The Laotian--there can be no doubt it--is profoundly pious.

With all his heart and soul, he has given himself up to Buddha, and believes most sincerely that, every day, all the actions of his life conform to the precepts of Him who need never be reborn.

Yes, the Laotian is a slave of Buddha. He confesses it publicly and repeats it a thousand times a day; it is a profound reality. The Laotian is a slave, let us say, an obedient servant, of Buddha.

THE REFORM OF BUDDHISM

Unfortunately the Laotian has made Buddhism in his own image.

Once again, we must state how great is the subjection of man to nature and historical events. Now, nature in this country is friendly and easy. And the events of history have made of us a vanquished people. Nature has inclined us to gentleness and peace. History has let us to seek comfort and consolation in the bosom of a tranquil and child-like Buddhism.

Behind the setting of religion, behind our monks

in eternal prayer and our faithful so piously attentive to the accomplishment of rites, what is there? There are--with a profoundly religious sentiment--ignorance, a great deal of fatalism and a never-- failing resignation. And all this, alas, leads us to death.

What ignorance is there among the monks! The pali (which is understood less and less) has become a screen and an opiate. In the pagodas unending talks take place on points of childish detail. Our monks, like the doctors of Molière, believe that they explain everything when they quote, more or less correctly, pali phrases or references not accessible to the common people. All the axioms, all the sophistries come to the aid of poor thinking and they repeat eternally the commonplace ideas on the vanity of life, the inevitable sufferings of existence and the inescapable character of death.

This poverty of thought is accompanied by a laxness, from day to day, greater in the realm of the rites. The monk is slack. One may observe it in the pagodas, as in the streets, in the cemeteries and in the homes.

Buddism is by its very nature deeply tolerant; but ours has become truly too easy going. Prayers are not well known and in the difficult passages they stop, leaving there companions to go on by themselves, resuming again when they have had a little repose. They smoke during religious ceremonies. They are garrulous. They walk in slouchy and undignified manner. In the realm of belief, as in the case with religious science, our monks have become far distant from the elite which they should constitute.

They enter upon ordinations and even baptism sadly lacking in preparation, without choice or signers! A proverb of this country tells us: "The lotus flower lies on the same level as the water of the lake." As are the laity, so are the monks.

Indeed the Laotian people lives listlessly, convinced of the futility of any action. Life is a trial to which one must submit and the best way of going

through with it, with a view to a better existence, is to keep what one already has, with the least possible modification, lest one do wrong.

So Laotian Buddhism preaches a discouraging individualism-- I should say egotism. "Attend only to your own salvation," Buddha has said, so the Laotian is not interested in others.

What does it matter if the monk is lacking in his moral or social duty; whether he no longer teaches; whether he is defrocked or already smiles at life under the robe of a monk? That is his own business. Each one does what he can: man is weak; too much should not be asked of him...

Precepts of despair and of resignation, formulas of abandonment and defeat: every Laotian has a full store of them and thinks they come from the Doctrine.

A contemporary author has written: "A man who gives up is a lost man."

I like the religion of my forefathers and I wish to serve my country. Let me be permitted to point out the great danger threatening us: We have made of Buddhism a doctrine of lethargy and resignation which leads our people to death.

Now our race wishes to live. It desires life and proves it. The magnificent movement for Lao renovation which, since 1941 has aroused our old country from its slumbering torpor and has aroused ardent echoes among all our youth. It is not to the formulas of discouragement and elevated by hope, by appeals to life.

Will this ardent youth conserve the faith of his fathers if they continue to find in it only ignorance and lethargy? It is most unlikely.

Reforms are necessary: they are urgent and should be profound. It is not appropriate for me, as a new Luther, to promote a complete program of reforms

destined to save a religion which has gone astray.

Can you save a man exhausted by many years of illness who, holding to the old remedies of xharlatans, refuses to hear one talk of the modern treatments and therapeutics? Indeed one cannot do it. And if, by chance, our man consents to place himself in the hands of a modern doctor, often it is too late. The illness has made too many inroads and the doctor can only delay the agony. What happens nine times out of ten with our sick people, who are taken to the hospital only when all hope has been abandoned? Will it not also happen to our Buddhism?

But is hope always necessary for action? In certain cases too much clairvoyance may lead to pessimism. The doctor who knows that a man is lost continues none the less to administer to him remedies necessary for his state of health.

It is in this spirit that I shall permit myself to outline some reforms needed in the Buddhism which is sinking.

First, it is essential to develop knowledge in the best of the monks. Instruction in Pâli, instruction in Lao, general instruction.

We must have a little group of enlightened monks--those who should be our religious leaders--who will render an account of their roles as educators and the mission which has devolved upon them; who as leaders of our consciences, will set the example in good behavior and cardinal virtues.

The day in which a little group of select monks will preach their teachings by example, will stigmatize the evil shepherds and will speak to their flocks the language of life, in that day perhaps we shall see again groups of young and old returning to the pagoda, with faith and hope in their hearts.

Together with the clergy in this effort for renewal all Laotians can and must take part. for the monk has

sprung from the faithful and lives on their charity.

In order that Buddhism may flourish in a new in the country, the Lao people must desire a clergy wiser, more dignified and more austere; they must support that desire, refusing to keep and revere the ignorant, lesser ones, who stagnate not so much in ethereal meditations as in laziness.

That is not impossible, for in my village I have seen serious and dignified monks, hardworking and active, self-respecting and respected by the populace.

In order to obtain this, it is necessary that all of us, officials and commoners, moved by a more active if not deeper religious motive, take a greater interest in the life and works of our monks. They must remain a longer time attached to their vows and not put aside their robes whenever they desire.

We must not tolerate in the religious those lapses of memory which are shocking; we should not tolerate the behavior of monks who walk the streets like the vulgar laity, talking loudly and gesticulating and who, with a little encouragement would participate in love-courts, laughing in the feasts and ceremonies at ribald jokes of the crowd, are more concerned with profane distractions than their true estate.

We must all become better acquainted with the rules of the Sangha, demand of the monks that they observe them more strictly, in order to make religious life impossible for those evil subjects whose only interest is to embarrass the Order.

Pagodas must be maintained and ornamented, in the first place by their own inhabitants, which is to say, the monks; it is they who must not look with unconcern on crumbling walk and columns without stooping to pick up bricks and sweep out the dust. Such are, in broad outline, the reforms which, it seems to me, should be imposed to rescue Buddhism. But are they sufficient? I have no illusions.

when a pagoda is falling down the faithful should bring their contribution to repair it; I bring mine, but that is not sufficient. Our mahas and our pandits should bring theirs: the hour for a grand synod has sounded, I should say, for a great reformer.

How many times as a disheartened spectator of certain religious manifestations, have I dreamed, when lingering in the shade of a That, of that man who would come to give Laos a new, living Buddhism.

On the steep slope of decay, the pitcher of our faith for a long time has been rollong adrift. Quicker and quicker it runs toward the fatal cataract or the hard reef on which it will break. On this declivity we must arrest it: it is an immense work and the life of one man is not long enough to accomplish this.

Admirable doctrine is this, which addressing itself to the heart as well as to reason, has been justly celebrated as one of purest jewels of this world of that time, from Greece to the Dutch Indies, from Thibet to Japan.

It triumphed not by the force of an enterprising proselytism--nothing is more contrary to this doctrine--but by the sole virtue of its truths it has taught men and the consolations it has brought them.

Twenty-five years after the Great Sage had delivered his first sermon, wise men from the Orient and the Occident still pender his words to discover in them the quintessence and exaltation of be auty.

The forefather of us, Laotian, have heard the word of the Most Wise. They opened their minds to its teaching. His Doctrine has been, from generation to generation, their consolation, their hope and the light of their life. Then the fame of the Lao country was acclaimed far and wide. And in all the valley of the Mekhong, innumerable pagodas, built with magnificence, celebrated at the time the grandeur of perfection and the glory of the Lao

country.

Will Laos detach itself from a Doctrine which has fashioned the soul of its ancestors? Will it divest itself of a faith which has been intimately intermingled in the labors and struggles of its fathers, in their dreams, in their hopes and that has presided in the most glorious centuries of our history.

I cannot believe it. At the very time in which, throughout all our domain, this country is pledged to improve its way of life it will pledge itself also, I feel certain, to its religion and its priests.

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